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PLAYWRITING FROM THE ACTOR'S POINT OF VIEW.

BY WILLIAM H. CRANE.

WHEN an architect who has never laid a section of a brick wall shall be excluded from professional practice on account of such an alleged disqualification, it will be time to prohibit an actor from writing upon dramatic topics.

A cynical critic recently said to me that "the playwright is more likely to become an actor than the actor to become a playwright. A writer produces what he calls a play, he takes it to a manager, and the manager in due time returns it as unavailable. It is ten to one that the play has not been read. No one is bound to inflict torture on himself, and a manager of any sagacity can decide after the first few pages whether a play by a novice is worth reading; the chances being a hundred to one at the outset that it is not. Then if the writer has a little money he overrules his hostile critic in this way. He gets the piece staged at his own expense and has himself cast for a part. And although his drama is sure to fail and does fail he sometimes develops sufficient talent to secure tolerably satisfactory engagements in travelling companies in utility parts. Such cases abound. Stage life has a peculiar fascination for literary people of small calibre. The wings are full of unappreciated Shakespeares. Kept down by the tyranny and blind prejudices of managers so that their own works fail of production, they avenge themselves by murdering the works of more fortunate writers."

I am not responsible for the foregoing opinion, but it is true that the actor who has begun at the foot of the ladder and climbed up is not disposed to write plays. To begin with, he sees a vast army of unsuccessful writers constantly besieging the manager,

hungry for recognition, eager to sell their productions, or to give them away if a sale is impossible. The rewards of an acceptable playwright are liberal, but this only tends to make the army of competitors larger and to draw into its ranks an enormously large quantity of unworthy material. In a newly-discovered mining district, for every man who stakes out a paying claim a hundred or more will stake out worthless ones; and yet capitalists, and those who know, will only buy and work the good one. The actor who has brains enough to contemplate the manufacture of a play has, by the very necessity of the case, brains enough to estimate the conditions that have just been stated. And if this would not be sufficient to deter him from devoting time and labor to such a pursuit his good sense steps in and tells him that if he would retain his hold upon the public he must concentrate his faculties upon one thing, namely, his duties as an actor. As an artist he must keep himself all the time in practice. A profession is paramount to all side issues.

I am aware that I may be referred to Shakespeare and to Boucicault as exceptions that destroy this theory. Shakespeare and Boucicault were indeed exceptions, but they only prove the rule. They were distinguished playwrights—Shakespeare beyond dispute peerless, and forever located on the top-most pedestal in the Pantheon of the Drama. But he was not a distinguished actor. He went on the stage to fill vacancies and for salary, or for what amounts to the same thing, to save payments of salaries. Being part owner and manager of a theatre he might well take the latter view of the case; and it is a matter of history that he was of a thrifty turn. And even if Garrick occasionally tinkered a play, this was done from the point of view of the manager; and was mainly in the line of suggestion. The *Clandestine Marriage* comes down to us as the joint production of George Colman and David Garrick, but the editor of the *British Theatre* tells us that only the design was furnished by Garrick, and that Colman did all the writing except the prologue and the epilogue; appendages of a play which in the eighteenth century appeared to be demanded by the public. Garrick had a weakness for these literary efforts; and his good reputation as an actor has survived in spite of the wretchedness of his verses. The histrionic artist is eulogized, while we condemn, and agree to forget, the wretched doggerel that rhymes “faults”

with "thoughts" * and that labors to detain an audience impatient to leave the house at the end of the play with such verses as these :

" Abused the moderns ; talked of Rome and Greece,
Bilked every box-keeper ; and damned the piece.

* * * * *

Now, every fable has a moral to it,
Be churchman, statesman ; anything but poet."

It is a just conclusion, then, that actors will continue to act plays, and that playwrights will continue to write them ; and in reference to the latter function we may not only estimate the present condition of the American drama, but to a certain extent forecast its future.

In point of fact there never has been so prolific a creation of manuscript plays as at present. The growth more than keeps up with the increase of our population ; it seems to be more like the proliferation of germs, about which medical men have so much to say, than like the normal increase of human beings. A manager of a city theatre is agreeably surprised on a day when he does not receive a new drama at his office, with the request to read it carefully and notify the author when to expect a rehearsal, and also whether he prefers to make payment in a lump sum or by royalty. Let us estimate that twenty-five new alleged plays are finished each day by the citizens and citizenesses of the United States. Some of these are kept at home to be read to admiring friends ; others are held by the typewriter by virtue of the lien which the law allows for work, labor and service ; but the bulk of them find their way into the manager's office. They come by mail, by express, by messenger, or they are brought by the author himself, or herself. The latter method is expected to be the most effective, but managers become case-hardened even against beauty in distress.

Plays that are not typewritten stand very little chance of being read ; if in manuscript and rolled, they stand no chance whatever. To send such plays is not a gamble ; it is a sure loss of time and money. A typewritten play the sheets of which have been kept flat between stiff boards, illustrated with stage directions and occasional diagrams of position, has a fair chance of being read as far as the first few pages. By that time the manager

* Epilogue to Hoadley's *Suspicious Husband*.

knows whether or not to pass it over to his reader. There is a living chance that the reader may like it well enough to tell the manager that it might answer if it were reconstructed. Calculation fails to tell us how many plays out of a given thousand reach this point; but it would not be a bad guess to assert that if fifty new plays are produced yearly on the American stage, ten thousand have been written and submitted during that period.

The reader must not regard this as a wild surmise. When in 1891 the *New York Herald* offered a prize for the best one-act play of six thousand words, over eight hundred were sent in in face of the knowledge that the prize could be awarded to only one, and that the demand for curtain-raisers was so limited that the unsuccessful competitors could never hope to find a market for their works. The average writer who sends a three or four act play to a manager hopes for much better odds than this, and he also expects to try other managers if he fails with the first one. In fact, on receiving a play from an aspirant one's first impulse is to scan it closely in order to discover whether it has gone the rounds before, and if so, how often, and where. There are certain signs that are likely to indicate such adventures, and it is fair to conclude that if an experimentally-written play by a novice has n't been looked into and rejected many times before it comes to the hands of any given manager, it is only because he happens to be the first on the list in the possession of the author.

A manuscript play passes through numerous theatre offices before it finally is laid to rest in the morgue in the author's desk—that dreary mausoleum of so many dead hopes and aspirations—consigned to an everlasting sleep beyond all expectation of resurrection, unless some morning the writer should wake up and find himself famous, in which case various enterprising managers would discover merit in and offer money for these forgotten productions. A number of playwrights, not only in America, but in Europe, have thus after a lucky inspiration been enabled to launch on prosperous seas a variety of rebuilt wrecks that had been laid aside to moulder in the dry rot of oblivion.

Alongside of the fact that the production of manuscript plays in America has greatly increased of late years, we find the fact, perhaps unavoidable, that many more really meritorious dramas are written which only fail of commending themselves to manag-

ers because of special defects. A small worm-hole suffices to spoil an otherwise sound apple; and a play, good in many respects, may be ruined beyond redemption by some lesion in the *motif*, some gap in the plot, some absurd aberration in the technique. A landscape purporting to be the work of a Troyon or a Van Marcke, and presenting a blue cow with pea-green horns in the foreground, would not be more ridiculous, or more hopelessly unavailable for exhibition or market, than many plays that are disfigured by incongruous and unheard-of situations, up to which the general trend of the action and dialogue have been natural and not unpleasing. Nothing is more difficult than to convince an unpractised author that his work is faulty. The well-versed playwright is quick to accept suggestions from the practical men of the stage; he is willing to cut out and piece in, and to listen to advice; but the tyro is deaf to such voices, because he is ignorant, and ignorance leads to stupidity.

If a hundred plays are produced now where ten were produced a generation ago, and if then there were nine bad to one good, and if now fifteen in the hundred are passably good, still the appalling fact remains that eighty-five are bad, and the inference is that the more literary activity is developed in the direction of the drama the greater will be the mass of bad plays sent in to managers. This is one of those future ills for which there is no help.

Could we arrange the productions of the coming years so that fewer worthless plays would be written, the papermaker might be a loser, but many people who might be usefully employed in honest vocations would be prevented from wasting time in composing dramas which managers will never read, and which will never see light except it be that of the kitchen fire which they will eventually help to kindle. Yet such a result can hardly be hoped. The failures of any man or set of men do not deter others no better equipped from adventuring in the same field. In the Eastern tale the aspirant for the hand of the princess was required first of all to cure her of melancholy or lose his head, and every morning a fresh head appeared on the gory battlements of her father's castle. No ambitious writer was ever kept away from his pens and paper because a thousand others were ruined by postage and express charges on their returned manuscripts.

But if, as scholars tell us, Horace wrote the "Art of Poetry" without any hope or expectation of creating good poets or reforming bad ones, but from a sense of obligation to the profession by which he earned the recognition of society and a livelihood, so may a practical actor who has had all his training in the school of the stage, hard and salutary as the rough labors, called sports, of a college campus, attempt to discharge a duty to his profession by noting some impressions as to playwriting which have been forced upon him in season and out of season upon the stage.

Prominent among these is the necessity for the possession of the dramatic instinct. This is not a matter of acquirement. It cannot be learned like the multiplication table. He who has it has it. He who has it not will labor to possess it in vain. Who teaches the bee to build the hexagonal cell? Who tells the swallow to fly south when the autumnal equinox arrives? Who instructed the wasp how to make paper for her nest out of the wood of old fence rails? Whoever answers these questions can also account for the dramatic instinct, and why a few people possess it actively and the great mass do not possess it at all.

Whoever regards the production of a play as purely a literary creation is hopelessly mistaken. The lines of a play do indeed require to be written down in order to be memorized, but it is not essential that they should be. The honest tradesmen whom Shakespeare in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* depicts as attempting to act the tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, are taught their lines by ear so that the drama might have been always vocal and never written at all, as the Homeric poems are said to have been, in their earlier days before the invention of letters. Therefore a play is not a question of literary ability employed in a given direction, nor is it a composition to be read; but it is to be seen and heard, with a bodily form and action conferred upon it by human beings.

A real drama is constructed and not written. It is built up as a house is erected by the bricklayer and stonemason, and the words are only the bricks and stones, and have the same relative value to the design of the playwright as these to the designs of the architect. The architect has the structure in existence and clearly wrought out, before the first stone is laid; and the drama of the true playwright is in existence before a word is written. Words there must be just as there must be bricks;

but as the latter can be carted from the kiln at current prices in any quantity, so can the former be brought to the playwright from the dictionary by any purveyor of sentences at current prices. The rare man who constructs a good play can hire men by the regiment to write the lines. But the dialogue; the epigram; the repartee; the brilliant speech such as we find in Congreve and in Sheridan? Is not this an essential? the reader will ask. Let us not put the cart before the horse. It is the situations that produce the dialogues; it is not the dialogues that produce the situations. Given a situation that calls for a smart, brisk, snappy, witty exchange of words, and the words will come. We see this in real life, and the stage copies real life. Even in so simple a situation as when a couple of cartmen get their wheels locked on Broadway on a muddy day and a policeman comes up to separate them, you will hear a good deal of smart though coarse dialogue. Such dialogue and all dialogue that grows out of any situation (and no dialogue worth listening to grows out of anything else) is interesting in proportion as the situation is interesting.

Without situation to call forth an interchange of language suitable to the occasion, and especially such situation as of itself interests the audience, and causes each member of it to ask himself what the characters will say next, a lot of well-dressed people might stand or sit around on the stage and fire off epigrams at each other, and the audience would yawn. Dramas, so-called, written in perfect accordance with syntax, witty here and there, and always elegant, pour in upon the manager and are rejected with the utmost energy and dispatch, because they are nothing but sermons or essays, in three or four chapters called acts. Their authors style them dramas because they are not dramatic; they divide them into acts because they involve no action; and subdivide them into scenes because where nothing is done, nothing can be seen. I may remark in passing that the old-fashioned shifting of scenes during an act is now only put into plays by novices who have not studied the modern stage.

Given, some novel, fascinating, exciting story and the dramatic instinct that throws the characters involved in the narrative into such situations as heighten the power of the incidents to move human emotions, and the literary work requisite to connect them becomes mere mechanism, as automatic as the winch that carries

bricks to the upper story of a new building. In fact, superior literary talent is not wanted. Lord Macaulay could never have written a good play ; and I doubt if he would not have spoiled a good one if he had collaborated with some born dramatist. Byron and Tennyson both failed as playwrights. Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is commended ; but you will find very few people who have ever read it once except as a parsing exercise at school ; you might safely offer a reward to any one who has read it twice ; and it is never acted. Johnson and Addison were both literary lights of the first magnitude, each a veritable Sirius in the firmament of authors, yet the *Irene* of the one and the *Cato* of the other were dead failures. Balzac confessed his inability to write a play. We might summarize the case thus, that while able constructors of situation and narrative have often put good language into the mouths of their characters and have thus contributed to literature, no literary man distinguished in belles-lettres, poetry, history or essay, has ever written a good play. May we not go further and say that he never will ? Yet we cannot make this assertion with positiveness, because there is a question of probabilities. One man in a thousand may have the dramatic instinct ; one man in a thousand may be in a superior degree literary. Then the chances are that one in a million may unite both functions in himself. Our figures are necessarily imaginary, but they indicate that such a conjunction will occur but rarely, and outside of Shakespeare we doubt if it has ever occurred.

This does not involve the assertion that a valid and useful alliance may not be made between the constructor and the writer. In fact, writing is often a drudgery to the builder of situations, whereas it is a perennial source of pleasure to the real literary man. Many of our best plays grow out of just such leagues. And during the progress of the work that is thus jointly carried on, such contentions arise as sprang up between the French and English allied forces on the day when Sebastopol was stormed. Each side magnifies his office, but the man of action wins. The literary partner aims to impress the audience with an array of ideas ; the constructive partner, the true dramatist, says : "Non-sense ; the public want action, movement, crisis ; they are satisfied with their own ideas." The latter is right and he carries his point. When you pay your money to see a horse race, you want to see two or more horses racing and not to listen to an essay on

equine physiology, even from the most learned and eloquent professor of natural history.

The tendency of the literary man, if he is a scholar, is to write over the heads of his audience, and to offend them by arrogance ; if he is a maker of stories, he expects the audience to listen to narratives and to the soliloquies with which he helps along his plot. A novel has been defined by Mr. Crawford to be a pocket drama ; but a drama is not by any means an expanded novel. The novel reader expects the author to do his thinking for him in perhaps sixty or a hundred thousand words*, off and on during a day or perhaps two or three : whereas the theatre-goer wants to form his own ideas as to certain actions that take place before his eyes in two hours and a half.

And one lesson which the dramatist must learn, without which all acquirements are useless, is that he must not be wiser than the public, nor set himself up as an instructor, a mentor, a moral or intellectual guide. A play with a purpose, constructed to teach moral lessons, without sufficient dramatic action, is a weariness whether to the boxes or the gallery, and the skilful architect of drama, even if he do convey a lesson, will not let his purpose be known. It will be his art to conceal art.

These hasty glances at a few salient points of our modern stage are but a few views at an infinitely large object ; at a few facets of an enormous diamond. As broad, as deep, as diversified as human life is the Drama ; both as to its facts and possibilities ; and rightly to construct one of these epitomes of human action, in which trivialities are omitted, and only strong and attractive incidents are dwelt upon, and so put in evidence that audiences shall merge themselves into the life of the characters, is one of the noblest and most difficult tasks ever self-set by mankind. Aside from the intrinsic difficulties of the case, the evanescent nature of all social conventionalities operates as a perpetual disappointment to the dramatist, and he realizes the full meaning of Pope's verses in relation to the fugitive themes offered by feminine habits :

"Come then, the colors and the ground prepare,—

* * * * *

Choose a firm cloud, and ere it fall, within it
Paint if you can the Cynthia of the minute."

WILLIAM H. CRANE.

* There are over 200,000 words in *Robert Elsmere*.